

## THE ARS POETICA

*Horace's young friends are offered advice on the craft of writing poetry. Innate ability is taken for granted (409–10), but does not lend itself to analysis.*

Suppose a painter decided to set a human head  
on a horse's neck, and to cover the body with coloured feathers,  
combining limbs so that the top of a lovely woman  
came to a horrid end in the tail of an inky fish –  
when invited to view the piece, my friends, could you stifle your  
[laughter?

Well, dear Pisos, I hope you'll agree that a book containing  
fantastic ideas, like those conceived by delirious patients,  
where top and bottom never combine to form a whole,  
is exactly like that picture.

‘Painters and poets alike  
have always enjoyed the right to take what risks they please.’  
I know; I grant that freedom and claim the same in return,  
but not to the point of allowing wild to couple with tame,  
or showing a snake and a bird, or a lamb and tiger, as partners.

10

Often you'll find a serious work of large pretensions  
with here and there a purple patch that is sewn on  
to give a vivid and striking effect – lines describing  
Diana's grove and altar, or a stream which winds and hurries  
along its beauteous vale, or the river Rhine, or a rainbow.  
But here they are out of place. Perhaps you can draw a cypress;  
what good is that, if the subject you've been engaged to paint  
is a shipwrecked sailor swimming for his life? The job began  
as a wine-jar; why as the wheel revolves does it end as a jug?  
So make what you like, provided the thing is a unified whole.

20

Poets in the main (I'm speaking to a father and his excellent sons)  
 are baffled by the outer form of what's right. I strive to be brief,  
 and become obscure; I try for smoothness, and instantly lose  
 muscle and spirit; to aim at grandeur invites inflation;  
 excessive caution or fear of the wind induces grovelling.  
 The man who brings in marvels to vary a simple theme  
 30 is painting a dolphin among the trees, a boar in the billows.  
 Avoiding a fault will lead to error if art is missing.

Any smith in the area round Aemilius' school  
 will render nails in bronze and imitate wavy hair;  
 the final effect eludes him because he doesn't know how  
 to shape a whole. If I wanted to do a piece of sculpture,  
 I'd no more copy him than I'd welcome a broken nose,  
 when my jet black eyes and jet black hair had won admiration.

You writers must pick a subject that suits your powers,  
 giving lengthy thought to what your shoulders are built for  
 40 and what they aren't. If your choice of theme is within your scope,  
 you won't have to seek for fluent speech or lucid arrangement.  
 Arrangement's virtue and value reside, if I'm not mistaken,  
 in this: to say right now what has to be said right now,  
 postponing and leaving out a great deal for the present.

The writer pledged to produce a poem must also be subtle  
 and careful in linking words, preferring this to that.  
 When a skilful collocation renews a familiar word,  
 that is distinguished writing. If novel terms are demanded  
 to introduce obscure material, then you will have the  
 50 chance to invent words which the apron-wearing Cethegi  
 never heard; such a right will be given, if it's not abused.  
 New and freshly created words are also acceptable  
 when channelled from Greek, provided the trickle is small. For why  
 should Romans refuse to Virgil and Varius what they've allowed  
 to Caecilius and Plautus? And why should they grumble if I succeed  
 in bringing a little in, when the diction of Ennius and Cato  
 showered wealth on our fathers' language and gave us unheard of  
 names for things? We have always enjoyed and always will  
 the right to produce terms which are marked with the current stamp.  
 60 Just as the woods change their leaves as year follows year  
 60a (the earliest fall, *and others spring up to take their place*)  
 so the old generation of words passes away,

and the newly arrived bloom and flourish like human children.  
 We and our works are owed to death, whether our navy  
 is screened from the northern gales by Neptune welcomed ashore –  
 a royal feat – or a barren swamp which knew the oar  
 feeds neighbouring cities and feels the weight of the plough,  
 or a river which used to damage the crops has altered its course  
 and learned a better way. Man's structures will crumble;  
 so how can the glory and charm of speech remain for ever?  
 Many a word long dead will be born again, and others  
 which now enjoy prestige will fade, if Usage requires it.  
 She controls the laws and rules and standards of language.

70

The feats of kings and captains and the grim battles they fought –  
 the proper metre for such achievements was shown by Homer.  
 The couplet of longer and shorter lines provided a framework,  
 first for lament, then for acknowledging a prayer's fulfilment.  
 Scholars, however, dispute the name of the first poet  
 to compose small elegiacs; the case is still undecided.  
 Fury gave Archilochus her own missile – the iambus.  
 The foot was found to fit the sock and the stately buskin,  
 because it conveyed the give and take of dialogue; also  
 it drowned the noise of the pit and was naturally suited to action.  
 The lyre received from the Muse the right to celebrate gods  
 and their sons, victorious boxers, horses first in the race,  
 the ache of a lover's heart, and uninhibited drinking.  
 If, through lack of knowledge or talent, I fail to observe  
 the established genres and styles, then why am I hailed as a poet?  
 And why, from misplaced shyness, do I shrink from learning the  
 [trade?

80

A comic subject will not be presented in tragic metres.  
 Likewise Thyestes' banquet is far too grand a tale  
 for verse of an everyday kind which is more akin to the sock.  
 Everything has its appropriate place, and it ought to stay there.  
 Sometimes, however, even Comedy raises her voice,  
 as angry Chremes storms along in orotund phrases;  
 and sometimes a tragic actor grieves in ordinary language –  
 Peleus and Telephus (one an exile, the other a beggar)  
 both abandon their bombast and words of a foot and a half  
 when they hope to touch the listener's heart with their sad appeals.

90

Correctness is not enough in a poem; it must be attractive,  
 leading the listener's emotions in whatever way it wishes.

100



When a person smiles, people's faces smile in return;  
 when he weeps, they show concern. Before you can move me to  
 [tears,  
 you must grieve yourself. Only then will your woes distress me,  
 Peleus or Telephus. If what you say is out of character,  
 I'll either doze or laugh. Sad words are required  
 by a sorrowful face; threats come from one that is angry,  
 jokes from one that is jolly, serious words from the solemn.  
 Nature adjusts our inner feelings to every variety  
 of fortune, giving us joy, goading us on to anger,  
 110 making us sink to the ground under a load of suffering.  
 Then, with the tongue as her medium, she utters the heart's  
 [emotions.

If what a speaker says is out of tune with his state,  
 the Roman audience, box and pit, will bellow with laughter.  
 A lot depends on whether the speaker is a god or a hero,  
 a ripe old man, or one who is still in the flush and flower  
 of youth, a lady of high degree, or a bustling nurse,  
 a roaming merchant, or one who tills a flourishing plot,  
 a Colchian or an Assyrian, a native of Thebes or Argos.

120 Writers, follow tradition, or at least avoid anomalies  
 when you're inventing. If you portray the dishonoured Achilles,  
 see that he's tireless, quick to anger, implacable, fierce;  
 have him repudiate laws, and decide all issues by fighting.  
 Make Medea wild and intractable, Ino tearful,  
 Ixion treacherous, Io a roamer, Orestes gloomy.  
 If you are staging something untried and taking the risk  
 of forming a new character, let it remain to the end  
 as it was when introduced, and keep it true to itself.

130 It's hard to express general things in specific ways.  
 You'd be well advised to spin your plays from the song of Troy  
 rather than introduce what no one has said or thought of.  
 If you want to acquire some private ground in the public domain,  
 don't continue to circle the broad and common track,  
 or try to render word for word like a loyal translator;  
 don't follow your model into a pen from which  
 diffidence or the laws of the genre prevent escape;  
 and don't begin in the style of the ancient cyclic poet:  
 'Of Priam's fate I sing and a war that's famed in story.'  
 What can emerge in keeping with such a cavernous promise?

The mountains will labour and bring to birth a comical mouse.  
 How much better the one who makes no foolish effort: 140  
 ‘Tell, O Muse, of the man who after Troy had fallen  
 saw the cities of many people and their ways of life.’  
 His aim is not to have smoke after a flash, but light  
 emerging from smoke, and thus revealing his splendid marvels:  
 the cannibal king Antíphates, the Cyclops, Scylla, Charybdis.  
 He doesn’t start Diomédes’ return from when Meleager  
 died, nor the Trojan war from the egg containing Helen.  
 He always presses on to the outcome and hurries the reader  
 into the middle of things as though they were quite familiar.  
 He ignores whatever he thinks cannot be burnished bright; 150  
 he invents at will, he mingles fact and fiction, but always  
 so that the middle squares with the start, and the end with the  
 [middle.

Consider now what I, and the public too, require,  
 if you want people to stay in their seats till the curtain falls  
 and then respond with warmth when the soloist calls for applause:  
 you must observe the behaviour that goes with every age-group,  
 taking account of how dispositions change with the years.  
 The child who has learnt to repeat words and to plant his steps  
 firmly is keen to play with his friends; he loses his temper 160  
 easily, then recovers it, changing from hour to hour.  
 The lad who has left his tutor but has not acquired a beard  
 enjoys horses and hounds and the grass of the sunny park.  
 Easily shaped for the worse, he is rude to would-be advisers,  
 reluctant to make any practical plans, free with his money;  
 quixotic and passionate, he soon discards what he set his heart on.  
 Manhood brings its own mentality, interests change;  
 now he looks for wealth and connections, strives for position,  
 and is wary of doing anything which may be hard to alter.  
 An old man is surrounded by a host of troubles: he amasses  
 money but leaves it untouched, for he’s too nervous to use it; 170  
 poor devil, his whole approach to life is cold and timid;  
 he puts things off, is faint in hope, and shrinks from the future.  
 Morose and a grumbler, he is always praising the years gone by  
 when he was a boy, scolding and blaming ‘the youth of today’.  
 The years bring many blessings as they come to meet us; receding,  
 they take many away. To avoid the mistake of assigning  
 an old man’s lines to a lad, or a boy’s to a man, you should always  
 stick to the traits that naturally go with a given age.

An action is shown occurring on stage or else is reported.

180 Things received through the ear stir the emotions more faintly  
than those which are seen by the eye (a reliable witness) and hence  
conveyed direct to the watcher. But don't present on the stage  
events which ought to take place within. Much of what happens  
should be kept from view and then retailed by vivid description.  
The audience must not see Medea slaying her children,  
or the diabolical Atreus cooking human flesh,  
or Procne sprouting wings or Cadmus becoming a snake.  
I disbelieve such exhibitions and find them abhorrent.

190 No play should be longer or shorter than five acts,  
if it hopes to stage a revival 'in response to public demand'.  
Don't let a god intervene unless the dénouement requires  
such a solution; nor should a fourth character speak.  
The chorus should take the role of an actor, discharging its duty  
with all its energy; and don't let it sing between the acts  
anything not germane and tightly joined to the plot.  
It ought to side with the good and give them friendly advice,  
control the furious, encourage those who are filled with fear.  
It ought to praise the simple meal which is not protracted,  
healthy justice and laws, and peace with her open gates.  
200 It ought to preserve secrets, and pray and beseech the gods  
that good fortune may leave the proud and return to the wretched.

The pipe (which was not, as now, ringed with brass and a rival  
of the trumpet, but rather slender and simple with not many  
[openings])

was once enough to guide and assist the chorus and fill  
with its breath the rows of seats which weren't too densely packed.  
The crowd was, naturally, easy to count because it was small,  
and the folk brought with them honest hearts, decent and modest.  
When, thanks to their victories, the people widened their country,  
extending the walls around their city and flouting the ban  
210 which used to restrain daytime drinking on public occasions,  
a greater degree of licence appeared in tunes and tempo.  
(What taste was likely from an ignorant crowd on holiday,  
a mixture of country and town, riff-raff and well-to-do?)  
Vulgar finery and movements augmented the ancient art,  
as the piper trailed his robe and minced across the stage.  
The musical range of the sober lyre was also enlarged,  
while a cascading style brought in a novel delivery,



and the thought, which shrewdly purveyed moral advice and also predicted the future, came to resemble the Delphic oracles.

The man who competed in tragic verse for a worthless he-goat  
later presented as well the naked rustic satyrs. 220

Rough, though without any loss of dignity, he turned to joking;  
for the crowd which, after observing the rites, was drunk and  
[unruly,

had to be kept in their seats by something new and attractive.

However, to make a success of your clownish cheeky satyrs  
and achieve a proper transition from heavy to light, make sure  
that no god or hero who is brought on to the stage  
shall, after just being seen in regal purple and gold,  
take his language down to the plane of a dingy cottage,  
or in trying to keep aloft grasp at cloudy nothings. 230

Tragedy thinks it beneath her to spout frivolous verse;  
and so, like a lady obliged to dance on a public holiday,  
she'll be a little reluctant to join the boisterous satyrs.

If *I* ever write a satyr drama, my Pisos, I shan't  
confine my choice to plain and familiar nouns and verbs;  
nor shall I strive so hard to avoid the tone of tragedy  
that it might as well be the voice of Davus or brazen Pythias,  
who has just obtained a talent by wiping Simo's eye,  
as of Silenus – guardian and servant of the god in his care.

I'll aim at a new blend of familiar ingredients; and people 240  
will think it's easy – but will waste a lot of sweat and effort  
if they try to copy it. Such is the power of linkage and joinery,  
such the lustre that is given forth by commonplace words.

Fauns from the forest, in my opinion, ought to be careful  
not to go in for the dandy's over-emotional verses,  
or to fire off volleys of filthy, disgraceful jokes,  
as if they came from the street corner or the city square.

Knights – free-born and men of property – take offence  
and don't greet with approval all that's enjoyed by the buyer  
of roasted nuts and chick-peas, or give it a winner's garland. 250

A long syllable after a short is named Iambus.

Being a quick foot, he ordered iambic verses  
to be called 'trímeters', in spite of the fact that six beats  
occurred in a pure iambic line. At a time in the past,  
so as to reach the ear with a bit more weight and slowness,  
he was kind and obliging enough to adopt the stately spondees

and share the family inheritance – though never going so far in friendship as to relinquish the second or fourth position.

Iambus rarely appears in Accius' 'noble' trimeters,

260 and his all too frequent absence from the lines that Ennius trundles onto the stage leaves them open to the damaging charge of hasty and slapdash work or a disregard of art.

It isn't every critic who detects unmusical pieces;  
so Roman poets have enjoyed quite excessive indulgence.

Shall *I* therefore break out, and ignore the laws of writing?

Or assume my faults will be seen by all, and huddle securely within the permitted range? Then I've avoided blame;

I haven't earned any praise. My Roman friends, I urge you:  
get hold of your Greek models, and study them day and night.

270 To be sure, your forefathers praised the rhythm and wit of Plautus.

On both counts their admiration was far too generous,  
in fact it was stupid – assuming that you and I know how  
to tell the difference between clumsy and clever jokes,  
and discern correctness of sound with the aid of ear and fingers.

We are told Thespis discovered the genre of the tragic Muse  
which was never known before; he carried his plays on a wagon  
to be sung and acted by men who had smeared lees on their faces.

After him came Aeschylus, introducing the mask

and lordly robe; he laid a stage on lowish supports

280 and called for a sonorous diction and the wearing of high-soled boots.

Old Comedy followed, winning a lot of acclaim;

but its freedom exceeded the proper limit and turned to violence  
which needed a law to control it. The law was obeyed, and the

[chorus

fell silent in disgrace, having lost its right of insult.

Our own native poets have left nothing untried.

They have often been at their best when they have had the courage  
to leave the paths of the Greeks and celebrate home affairs  
with plays in Roman dress, whether serious or comic.

Latium now would be just as strong in her tongue as she is

290 in her valour and glorious arms if the patient work of the file  
didn't deter our poets each and every one.

Children of Numa, condemn the piece which many a day  
and many a rub of the stilus have not smoothed and corrected  
ten times over, to meet the test of the well-pared nail.



Because Democritus holds talent a greater blessing  
 than poor despised technique and debars a poet from Helicon  
 unless he's mad, many no longer cut their nails  
 or beard; they make for secluded spots and avoid the baths.  
 For a man will surely acquire the name and esteem of a poet  
 if he never allows the scissors of Lícinus near his head – 300  
 a head which three Antícyras couldn't cure. And me?  
 Like a fool I banish madness by taking springtime sedatives.  
 No one could put together better poems; but really  
 it isn't worth it. And so I'll play the part of a grindstone  
 which sharpens steel but itself has no part in the cutting.  
 Without writing, I'll teach the poet his office and function,  
 where he can find his resources, what nurtures and shapes him,  
 what is correct, what not; what is right and wrong.  
 Moral sense is the fountain and source of proper writing.  
 The pages of Socrates' school will indicate your material; 310  
 once that is provided, words will readily follow.  
 First be clear on what is due to your country and friends;  
 what is involved in loving a parent, brother, or guest;  
 what is the conduct required of a judge or member of senate;  
 what are the duties imposed on a general sent to the front.  
 Then you will give the proper features to every character.  
 The trained playwright, I say, should turn to life and behaviour  
 for dramatic models – and as a source of living speech.  
 A play with attractive moral comments and credible characters,  
 but wholly lacking in charm and poetic force and finish, 320  
 sometimes pleases the public and holds its interest better  
 than lines devoid of content – mere melodious wind.  
 The Muse bestowed on the Greeks talent and also the favour  
 of eloquent speech; they craved for nothing but admiration.  
 Roman children learn by doing long calculations  
 how to divide the *as* a hundred times. 'Very well then,  
 young Albanus: five twelfths – we subtract one of them,  
 what's the remainder? Come on, hurry up!'

'A third, sir.'

'Splendid!

*You'll* look after your money! Now *add* a twelfth to make it –'  
 'A half.' But when this craze for coppers, this verdigris, 330  
 has formed on our hearts, how can we hope to fashion poems  
 fit to be oiled with cedar and stored in polished cypress?

The aim of a poet is either to benefit or to please  
 or to say what is both enjoyable and of service.  
 When you are giving advice, be brief, to allow the learner  
 quickly to seize the point and then retain it firmly.  
 If the mind is full, every superfluous word is spilt.  
 Make sure that fictions designed to amuse are close to reality.  
 A play should not expect us to take whatever it offers –  
 340 like ‘child devoured by ogress is brought alive from her belly’.  
 The senior bloc refuses plays which haven’t a message;  
 the haughty young bloods curl their nostrils at anything dry;  
 everyone votes for the man who mixes wholesome and sweet,  
 giving his reader an equal blend of help and delight.  
 That book earns the *Sosii* money; it crosses the ocean,  
 winning fame for the author and ensuring a long survival.

There are, of course, certain mistakes which should be forgiven.  
 A string doesn’t always sound as mind and finger intended  
 [when you want a bass it very often emits a treble],  
 350 nor does a bow invariably hit whatever it aims at.  
 In a poem with many brilliant features I shan’t be offended  
 by a few little blots which a careless pen has allowed to fall  
 or human nature has failed to prevent. Where do we stand, then?  
 If a copying clerk persistently makes the same mistake  
 in spite of numerous warnings, he is not excused; if a harpist  
 always misses the same note he causes laughter.  
 So for me the inveterate bungler becomes a *Choerilus*,  
 whose rare touches of goodness amaze and amuse me; I even  
 feel aggrieved when *Homer*, the pattern of goodness, nods.  
 360 Sleep, however, is bound to creep in on a lengthy work.

A poem is like a picture. One will seem more attractive  
 from close at hand, another is better viewed from a distance.  
 This one likes the gloom; this longs for the daylight,  
 and knows it has nothing to fear from the critic’s searching eye.  
 That pleased once; this will please again and again.

My dear *Piso* major, although your father’s voice  
 and your own good sense are keeping you straight, hear and  
 [remember  
 this pronouncement: in only a limited number of fields  
 is ‘fairly good’ sufficient. An average jurist and lawyer  
 370 comes nowhere near the rhetorical power of brilliant *Messalla*,

nor does he know as much as Aulus Cascellius; still,  
 he has a certain value; that *poets* should be only average  
 is a privilege never conceded by men, gods, or bookshops.  
 When, at a smart dinner, the orchestra's out of tune,  
 or the scent is heavy, or poppyseeds come in Sardinian honey,  
 we take it amiss; for the meal could have been served without them.  
 It's the same with a poem, whose *raison d'être* is to please the

[mind;

as soon as it misses the top level, it sinks to the bottom.

A man who is hopeless at field events avoids the equipment,  
 keeping his ignorant hands off shot, discus and javelin,

380

for fear of giving the crowds of spectators a free laugh.  
 The fellow who is useless at writing poetry still attempts it.

Why not? He's free, and so was his father; his fortune is rated  
 at the sum required of a knight; and his heart's in the right place!

*You* will compose and complete nothing against the grain  
 (you have too much sense and taste). If you do write something

[later,

be sure to read it aloud to the critic Tarpa, and also  
 to your father and me. Then hold it back 'till the ninth year',  
 keeping your jotter inside the house. You can always delete  
 what hasn't been published; a word let loose is gone for ever.

390

Before men left the jungle, a holy prophet of heaven,  
 Orpheus, made them abhor bloodshed and horrible food.  
 Hence he is said to have tamed rabid lions and tigers.  
 It is also said that Amphiôn, who built the city of Thebes,  
 moved rocks by the sound of his lyre and led them at will  
 by his soft appeals. This was the wisdom of olden days:  
 to draw a line between sacred and secular, public and private;  
 to bar indiscriminate sex, and establish laws of marriage;  
 to build towns and inscribe legal codes on wood.

That is how heavenly bards and their poems came to acquire  
 honour and glory; after them Tyrtaeus and Homer  
 won renown, for their verses sharpened the courage of men  
 to enter battle. Song was the medium of oracles, song  
 showed the way through life. By means of Pierian tunes  
 a king's favour was sought, and an entertainment devised  
 to close a season of long work. So don't be ashamed  
 if you love the Muse's skill on the lyre and Apollo's singing.

400



Is it a gift or a craft that makes outstanding poetry?  
 I fail, myself, to see the good either of study  
 410 without a spark of genius or of untutored talent.  
 Each requires the other's help in a common cause.  
 The Olympic athlete who strains to breast the finishing tape  
 worked and suffered a lot as a boy, sweating and freezing,  
 leaving wine and women alone. The piper competing  
 at Delphi was once a learner and stood in awe of his teacher.  
 Is it enough to proclaim 'I'm a marvellous poet!  
 The last one home is a cissy; I hate to lag behind  
 or admit I'm utterly ignorant of something I never learnt'?

As an auctioneer attracts a crowd to bid for his goods,  
 420 a poet with large estates and large sums invested  
 encourages toadies to come and obtain something for nothing.  
 If he's also the sort who knows how to serve delicious dinners,  
 who will sponsor a shifty and penniless client or come to his rescue  
 when he's up to his neck in a lawsuit, then I'll be very surprised  
 if the lucky fellow can tell a true friend from a sham.  
 When you have given someone a present, or plan to do so,  
 and he's pleased and excited, never invite him to hear any verses  
*you* have written. He'll shout 'Fine! Lovely! Oh yes!'  
 He will turn pale at this, at that he will squeeze a tear  
 430 from his loyal eyes; he will jump to his feet and stamp the ground.  
 Just as those who are hired to come and wail at a funeral  
 say and do, if anything, more than the truly bereaved,  
 so the fake is more visibly moved than the real admirer.  
 When kings are keen to examine a man and see if he merits  
 their trust, we are told, they make him submit to the test of wine,  
 plying him with a succession of glasses. So if *you* compose,  
 make sure you are not deceived by the fox's hidden malice.

When you read a piece to Quintilius he'd say 'Now shouldn't you  
 [alter  
 that and that?' If you swore you had tried again and again  
 440 but couldn't do any better, he'd tell you to rub it out  
 and to put the lines which were badly finished back on the anvil.  
 If, instead of removing the fault, you chose to defend it,  
 he wouldn't waste another word or lift a finger  
 to stop you loving yourself and your work without a rival.  
 An honest and sensible man will fault lines that are feeble,  
 condemn the clumsy, proscribe with a black stroke of the pen

those which haven't been trimmed, prune pretentious adornment,  
where a place is rather dark insist that light be admitted,  
detect ambiguous expressions, and mark what ought to be changed.  
He'll be a new Aristarchus; nor will he say 'Why should I  
annoy a friend over trifles?' For such 'trifles' will lead  
to serious trouble once he is greeted with laughter and hisses.

450

As with the man who suffers from a skin disease or jaundice  
or religious frenzy caused by the lunar goddess's anger,  
sensible people are wary of touching the crazy poet  
and keep their distance; children unwisely follow and tease him.  
Away he goes, head in the air, spouting his verses;  
and if, like a fowler watching a bird, he happens to tumble  
into a pit or a well, however long he may holler  
'Somebody! Help!' no one will bother to pull him out.  
If anyone does bring help and drops him down a rope,  
'How do you know,' I'll say, 'he didn't throw himself in  
on purpose, and doesn't want to be *left* there?' I'll add the tale  
of the poet of Sicily's death – how Empedocles, eager to join  
the immortals, leaped into Etna's inferno (thus catching fire  
for the first time). Dying is a poet's right and privilege.  
To save him against his will is tantamount to murder.  
He's done it before; and it's not as if, when you hauled him up,  
he'd become human and cease to yearn for a notable death.  
One wonders why he persists in writing poetry. Is it  
a judgement for pissing on his father's ashes, or has he profaned  
a gruesome place where lightning has struck? He's certainly mad,  
and like a bear that has managed to smash the bars of its cage  
he scatters everyone, cultured or not, by the threat of reciting.  
For he firmly grips the person he catches, and reads him to death.  
The leech never lets go the skin till he's full of blood.

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## *The Ars Poetica*

6. *Pisos*: According to Porphyry, these were L. Calpurnius Piso (Consul 15 BC) and his sons. No sons have been certainly identified but see pp. 19–21 of my commentary.
50. *Cethegi*: An old patrician family.
55. *Caecilius and Plautus*: See notes on *Epistles* II. 1. 58–9.
- 60a. *and others . . . place*: The words in italics are supplied by conjecture.
64. *Neptune welcomed ashore*: I.e. the construction of a harbour.
79. *Archilochus*: See note on *Epistles* I. 19. 24.



80. *sock and the stately buskin*: Comedy and tragedy, as represented by their footwear. The 'sock' was a kind of slipper.
90. *Thyestes' banquet*: See note on Persius 5. 8.
94. *Chremes*: The angry father was a stock figure in New Comedy; the Chremes of Terence's *Heautontimorumenos* was not the only character of that name.
96. *Peleus*: Experienced many troubles (including exile on two occasions) before marrying Thetis and becoming the father of Achilles.  
*Telephus*: Son of Hercules, went to Achilles in a pitiful condition begging him to heal the wound which he had inflicted.
118. *Colchian*: A fierce barbarian from the region east of the Black Sea.  
*Assyrian*: A soft, effeminate type, representing oriental luxury.
120. *dishonoured*: The text *honoratum* ('honoured') gives the wrong sense. I have translated Nisbet's conjecture *inornatum* ('deprived of honour'); cf. *Odes* IV. 9. 31.
123. *Medea*: The princess from Colchis who protected Jason but was later abandoned by him and took a terrible revenge. The most famous treatment of the story is that of Euripides.  
*Ino*: Another tragic heroine, but of a more pathetic kind than the fierce Medea. She was driven mad by Hera for nursing the infant Dionysus.
124. *Ixion*: Murdered Eioneus having promised him a generous sum for the hand of his daughter. He was purified by Zeus, but repaid him by attempting to violate Hera.  
*Io*: Loved by Zeus and then turned into a heifer. After many wanderings she reached Egypt, where she was restored to human shape.  
*Orestes*: Murdered his mother Clytemnestra to avenge the death of his father Agamemnon.
136. *cyclic poet*: The epic cycle was a collection of post-Homeric epics artificially arranged in a series so as to run from the creation of the world to the end of the heroic age. The particular poet referred to by Horace has not been identified.
- 137-8. *Of Priam's fate . . . promise*: A paraphrase of the opening of the *Odyssey*.
145. *the cannibal king . . . Charybdis*: The figures mentioned come from *Odyssey* 10. 100f., 9. 187f., and 12. 81f.
146. *Diomedes' return*: I.e. some cyclic poet began his account of Diomedes' return from Troy with the death of the hero's great-uncle Meleager. Homer does not waste time on such tedious preliminaries.
172. *he puts things . . . the future*: A difficult and controversial line. Following Bentley, I have adopted *spe lentus* instead of *spe longus*, and *pavidus futuri* instead of *avidus futuri*. The reading *avidus futuri* would mean 'longs for the future'. Even if it is true that the typical old man is eager for the future (which I doubt), Horace would hardly have used the dynamic *avidus* along with *iners* (listless).

186. *Atreus*: Murdered the sons of his brother Thyestes and served them to their father at dinner.
187. *Procne*: Served her son Itys to her husband Tereus in revenge for Tereus' rape and mutilation of her sister Philomela. When pursued by Tereus, Procne changed into a nightingale (or a swallow).  
*Cadmus*: The founder of Thebes, eventually went to Illyria with his wife Harmonia, where they were both turned into large but harmless snakes.
220. *he-goat*: Horace is alluding to the derivation of tragedy from *tragos*, the Greek for he-goat.
221. *satyrs*: A reference to the origin of satyric drama.
- 237–8. *Davus* . . . *Pythias* . . . *Simo*: Comic characters; the first a slave, the second a slave-girl, and the third an old man.
239. *Silenus*: The teacher and guardian of Bacchus, seen here as a dignified figure.
253. *trimeters*: An iambic metron consisted of two feet; hence a trimeter had six.
254. *At a time in the past*: Glosses over an unsolved crux.
259. *noble*: Not in Horace's judgment, but in that of Accius' admirers. For Accius, see note on *Satires* I. 10. 53.
270. *Plautus*: See note on *Epistles* II. 1. 58.
275. *Thespis*: See note on *Epistles* II. 1. 163.
278. *Aeschylus*: See note on *Epistles* II. 1. 163.
281. *Old Comedy*: Its three main representatives are named in *Satires* I. 4. 1.
292. *Children of Numa*: The Calpurnius Piso family claimed to trace its descent from King Numa.
293. *stilus*: The blunt end of the stilus was used as an eraser.
295. *Democritus holds*: Probably in his book on poetry.  
*talent*: *Ingenium*.
296. *technique*: *Ars*.
300. *Licinus*: Unknown.
301. *three Anticyras*: Anticyra in Phocis on the Gulf of Corinth produced hellebore, which was used in the treatment of madness. Three Anticyras, therefore, meant something like 'three times the output of Anticyra'.
309. *Moral sense*: *Sapere*.
310. *Socrates' school*: A vague phrase denoting 'writers on moral philosophy'.
343. *wholesome and sweet*: *Utile* and *dulce*.
349. [*when you want . . . a treble*]: This line is probably spurious. The fault it describes is not a minor one, and there is a difficulty over the word *persaepe*. See Brink's note.
357. *Choerilus*: See note on *Epistles* II. 1. 233.
370. *Messalla*: See note on *Satires* I. 10. 28.
371. *Aulus Cascellius*: Born c. 104 BC. He may not have been still alive, but his reputation survived.

375. *Sardinian honey*: This was bitter.
387. *Tarpa*: See note on *Satires* I. 10. 38.
388. *the ninth year*: Probably an allusion to Cinna's *Zmyrna*, which according to Catullus 95 finally saw the light in the ninth year.
392. *Orpheus*: The moral progress brought about by Orpheus is ascribed to his poetry.
394. *Amphion*: See note on *Epistles* I. 18. 42.
401. *Tyrtaeus*: A Spartan elegiac poet of the seventh century BC.
404. *Pierian*: The district of Pieria in Thessaly was associated with the Muses.
405. *a king's favour*: Simonides, Pindar, and Bacchylides sought the patronage of rulers in fifth-century Sicily.
- 414–15. *Delphi*: There were musical competitions at the Pythian games.
437. *fox's hidden malice*: In Aesop's fable the crow, congratulated on his singing by the cunning fox, drops the piece of cheese.
438. *Quintilius*: Quintilius Varus of Cremona, the friend of Horace and Virgil, died in 24/23 BC. See *Odes* I. 24.
454. *lunar goddess*: Diana; cf. 'lunacy'.
- 464–6. *how Empedocles . . . the first time*: Empedocles associated cold blood with dullness, which is apparently why Horace calls him *frigidus*, an adjective which could be used in a literary context. See also *Epistles* I. 12. 20n.
472. *a gruesome place*: A place struck by lightning was fenced off and consecrated. Cf. Persius 2. 26.